

The New How: Driving team performance

Driving team performance by building trust and developing a collective growth mindset.

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In 2013, research conducted by EY¹ revealed that almost 9 out of 10 executives agreed that the problems they were facing were so complex that teams were going to be integral to creating impactful solutions. Fast forward eight years and we believe it would be fair to say that the 'problems' we face are no less complex than before. In fact, they have likely multiplied in their significance, begging the question 'are teams now more important than ever before?'

Over the course of twenty-five years working with managers, leaders and individuals, the issues within teams have remained constant; whether it's 'how do I get my team to work more collaboratively?' or 'how can we get better results?' or 'how do I manage the conflict that is crippling my team?' We have no doubt that you could also think of a further list of issues that arise in teams, undermining business critical performance metrics – both the hard and the soft.

This white paper examines what it takes to build trust in teams and how a collective growth mindset is not only good for the individual, but the team as a whole. It examines the role of leadership in creating the right environment, culture and behaviours – creating a followership towards performance.

Without the support and expertise of facilitators and an external lens, it is often hard for leaders and managers to not only identify those issues that are having the biggest impact, but also tackle them. This white paper will give some understanding to these issues, as well as tried and tested methodologies to prevent them from happening time and time again (or at least deal with them when they do happen).

If you have any thoughts on this white paper or would like to discuss any of the issues raised in it, do get in touch.

All the best,

Caroline and Adam.



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Introduction

In order to answer the question 'how can I drive my team's performance?' we must first consider what 'performance' and 'team' really mean. Similarly, when discussing 'trust' and a 'growth mindset', it feels critical that we all start from the same place. With this in mind:

Performance – The Cambridge English Dictionary² defines performance as 'how well a person, machine, etc., does a piece of work or an activity.' For the sake of this white paper however – given the reference to teams – we will be drawing on a definition shared in the Psychology Dictionary³; 'any activity or gathering of reactions which leads to an outcome or has an impact on the surroundings.'

Team – There are an array of different definitions for what a team is and is not. As part of this white paper, we will be using Katzenbach and Smith's⁴ definition of a team; 'a small group of people with complementary skills who are committed to a common purpose, performance goals, and approach for which they hold themselves mutually accountable.'

Trust – Regardless of the definition used, trust is a central part of all human relationships. If you don't trust your manager or team, there is absolutely no doubt that it is harder to benefit from their professional and personal advice. Within this white paper, we will be discussing trust within the context of Maister's four components; (i) Reliability; (ii) Credibility; (iii) Intimacy; and (iv) Self-interest.

Growth Mindset – In her book 'Mindset', Stanford Professor Carol Dweck describes those who demonstrate a growth mindset as believing that their success is dependent upon the time and effort that they give to a specific task or skill. They believe that their skills and intelligence (for example) can be improved with hard work and persistence. They embrace challenges, strive to overcome obstacles and learn from feedback – seeking out inspiration in others' success.

The relationship between team performance, trust and a growth mindset

What does all this mean for you? And how are team performance, trust and a growth mindset related? Well, employees in 'high-trust organisations' have been found to be more productive, have more energy at work, collaborate better with colleagues, and stay with their employers longer than those working in low-trust organisations. Furthermore, they suffer less chronic stress, are happier with their lives and, perhaps most importantly for managers and leaders alike, perform stronger than those for whom the same cannot be said (Zak, 2017⁵).

Combine this with the fact that with the 'right' mindset, feedback becomes an opportunity to show growth and improvement – as well as mistakes turning into improved performance next time around – and it feels like we have a compelling argument for creating high performing teams that are built upon trust and a collective growth mindset. Teams that share their learnings and knowledge with one another, rather than viewing colleagues as competition. Teams that view challenge and constructive conflict as an opportunity to reflect, collaborate and develop, with better results for everyone as a result.

So, if we are saying that team performance can be driven by building trust, then it should be easy right? Everyone knows what trust is and individuals should know that they can trust their teammates. Right? Wrong! Lencioni (2002)⁶ suggests that the 'absence of trust' is a common dysfunction in teams. Most teams work on 'predictive' trust where they have worked with colleagues long enough to feel like they can predict their colleague's feelings, behaviours and mindset – but this isn't the kind of trust which makes teams great.



Can or will members of the team genuinely say things to each other such as 'I don't know the answer, I need help'?"



The relationship between team performance, trust and a growth mindset continued

Vulnerability-based trust is what really makes a team perform and is a predictor of success.

This is most commonly seen in business in the stereotype of someone who rejects other's ideas and will defend their own ideas furiously. If just one member of a team doesn't feel like they can't be vulnerable, it will spread through the whole team.

Brene Brown⁷ describes vulnerability as "uncertainty, risk and emotional exposure. It's that unstable feeling we get when we step out of our comfort zone or do something that forces us to loosen control."

To allow others to be vulnerable – the leader must go first. If they can't, no one goes next and this means that no one will ever say they need to learn anything, therefore shutting out the opportunity to improve themselves or indeed the culture and performance around them. They will defend their talents and operate with a fixed mindset rather than a growth mindset.

But what do we do when teams are changing? At a time when we're becoming increasingly virtual, globalised and diverse. When teams are becoming more temporary and multi-team membership is commonplace. When our context is changing faster than ever before. The answer is that we need to accelerate the speed at which we can form a sense of 'team'. But how do we do this? Below are ten pieces of advice for developing high performing teams quickly.



Ten pieces of advice:

1

Share the 'social categories' that you fall into. For example, the team that you are typically part of. This enables 'temporary trust' to form not on the basis of observed behaviour (which you are unlikely to have the time to witness), but rather the stereotypical expectations of that particular 'category'. In essence, trust is built on the grounds of what people know about your group or team – or the organisation you represent – rather than you as an individual. But what if your team doesn't have a particularly good reputation? Introduce yourself as belonging to a different category that better represents who you are and what you can bring to the team, or better yet, address those issues that you fear could prevent trust from forming. You might be surprised by the impact that this level of honesty has on your new peers.

2

Start with the end in mind. What do you want your team 'brand' to be? What is the reputation that you want to create for yourselves as a team? What would "good" look like come the end of the project? Does the team agree on this? If not, why not? By starting with the end in mind, you can work backwards from there – determining the behaviours and mindset that are going to help you achieve success. Critically as part of this conversation, there might be a need to define what 'good enough' looks like – particularly if you have individuals who describe themselves as 'perfectionists', or those who have previously struggled to reach the standard that you deem to be appropriate (as a leader or teammate).

3

Ensure that each team member has role clarity and understands how the role that they are playing contributes to the team achieving its ultimate goal or ambition. It is critical that everyone understands where decision making 'power' lies and at what stages of the project or task. Never assume that what is obvious to you is obvious to all – particularly when projects are complex or need to be completed at pace.

4

Aspire to have at least one shared goal. Whilst it is often critical that we 'divide and conquer', there is a risk that comes with having everyone focus on their distinct 'part' of the project – they work in isolation and are not willing to flex or adapt to other parts of the team. This can mean that people often go off in their own direction, almost guaranteeing that the project is not going to be as impactful as it would be, should team members share at least one outcome goal. This encourages group decision making (when/where appropriate) and means that team members are more likely to collaborate and, if required, compromise in order to create an improved group outcome.

5

Make best use of team members' lived experiences. Whilst qualifications and 'years in role' are important, they are not the be-all and end-all. The best ideas often come from the most junior member of the team, who is yet to be indoctrinated by a particular organisation or way of thinking. Whilst a shared mental model can often be a good thing, it can stifle creativity and innovation – preventing problem solving as a result. By asking people about their interpretation of a particular issue or opportunity, or similar scenarios that they have been in (including what did and didn't work), you might find that there is a transferable idea or different way of thinking that might otherwise have been missed. You might also find an opinion or thought that challenges your typical way of leading etc.

Ten pieces of advice continued

6

Go slow to go fast. Whilst all of this might feel like time you don't have, time and time again we find that by investing in these activities, you prevent many of the issues that prevent teams from becoming high performing (before they actually happen). Avoid the temptation to dive into the task – as we typically do. Move away from cliché conversations about the weather and traffic. Ask your team about their opinions and concerns. What are they excited about? Why do they do what they do? By creating a shared sense of purpose, and discussing the communication channels that you are going to use on an ongoing basis (for example), you can ensure that these factors do not become an issue further down the line.

7

Offer consistency as a leader. Neuropsychology tells us that generally, people prefer order and routine. Given that trust is an accumulation of many small things – including those stories and experiences that demonstrate your reliability, credibility, ability to form meaningful relationships and a lack of self-interest – the extent to which people feel you are fair and consistent in your reactions/behaviours will dictate how willing they are to approach you; whether that be to share their successes or discuss their issues. Remember that you are responsible for the people who are responsible for the job – not the job itself.

8

In the words of Simon Sinek, remember that you're not in charge. You're responsible for those in your charge. The days of command and control are gone (if they were ever here at all?). Shared leadership consistently raises its head as a contributing factor to high performing teams, with the need to act as a 'facilitator' increasingly gathering momentum as a critical leadership skill. Seek out opportunities to give away responsibility and once you have done so, use your time to support those who are now accountable. Offer optimum levels of vision, support and challenge – which will look different for each and every team member – ensuring that your teams are getting what they need in order to flourish, whilst ensuring that you are getting work to the standard and quality that you know is necessary.

9

Appreciate the need for flexibility. The days of Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm are gone. Different team members are going to want and need different things from you as a leader, and their peers as teammates. Take the time to understand these needs. Get to grip with why they are important. This will likely give you an insight into what really matters for particular individuals, which you can use to inspire and motivate your team.

10

Recognise that it is not enough to simply articulate your team culture. Whilst your purpose, vision and values are integral to your long-term success, they are only going to enable performance if what you have captured on paper is what people actually experience on a daily basis. The gap that exists between what you say it's like to be part of your team, and what it's like in reality, will heavily influence the performance and 'feel' of your team. Accept that the past and your 'deep' culture will inevitably influence performance today. If individuals have undermined the team's ethos previously, or behaviours other than those agreed as being integral for success have been rewarded or punished, chances are these need to be addressed before optimum performance can be achieved. Take the time to open up a two-way dialogue between leader and team member, celebrating those behaviours that you would like to see more of (as well as the outputs that you are working towards).

What leaders need to do next

It is clear that change is here to stay and that teams – as well as teams of teams – have the power to deliver collective performance. In order that this advantage is utilised, leaders must start:

1. Focusing less on hierarchy and more on the skills required to get the job done. This is typically noticed by the removal of 'status' symbols such as car parking spaces, corner offices etc.
2. Ensuring performance metrics support collaboration rather than competition. Leaders must find ways to reward collective effort, rather than singling out and promoting individualistic behaviours.
3. Hiring individuals with a collaborative skillset. Find people who understand the power of 'we', rather than just 'I'.
4. Working with clients who appreciate diversity of thinking and inclusivity of experience. Just because someone has been doing something for a certain number of years doesn't mean they are any good at it – just ask an amateur golfer! Leaders must move away from a 'time served' mentality.
5. Encouraging less bureaucracy within their business, thus ensuring that teams are fleet of foot and can adapt as necessary throughout the course of change.

And finally, and perhaps most importantly, Ghandi said it beautifully –



Be the change you want to see in the world."

Leaders must show that they are happy being part of a team, demonstrate they see the value in team performance and they believe that the power of "we" is greater than the power of "I".



For more information, please contact us. We'd be delighted to hear from you.



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